

Chapter 8

Iraq in Turmoil

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The eighteen months between February 2006 and August 2007, in many respects the most difficult period in Iraq since America's military intervention there began, were particularly plagued by the changing nature of the violence. In the first two years, most terror attacks were executed by Sunni elements, mainly those loyal to Saddam Hussein's regime, and by Islamist fighters who infiltrated into Iraq. The attacks targeted primarily coalition forces and elements connected to the new Shiite-led regime. However since 2005 and especially in 2006, violence and terror pursued an inter-ethnic direction; extremist Shiite militias began to attack Sunni groups and populations, while Sunni organizations continued attacking government institutions and Shiite populations. While the number of civilians killed in Iraq from 2003–2005 was estimated at 10,000–14,000 per year, this number doubled in 2006–2007. Thus the violence in Iraq began to assume characteristics of a civil war.

Improvement from Mid-2007

The deteriorating situation in Iraq posed an increasingly severe challenge to the Bush administration. Weighing heavily on the administration was the growing acknowledgement that the Iraqi affair was a grievous and unnecessary failure, with no indication of a viable improvement in the future. That the Bush administration

was nearing the end of its term was an additional constraining factor. Furthermore, international support for the administration dwindled as most other coalition members in Iraq withdrew or downsized their forces.

President Bush's response in January 2007 was to announce an intermediate approach, called the "New Way Forward." The principal tool for implementing this approach was a "surge," namely, the dispatch of additional forces on a limited scale to help coalition forces, aided by Iraqi forces, to improve the security situation, primarily in Baghdad and the surrounding area. The beefed-up forces would presumably reduce Sunni violence, hit al-Qaeda strongholds, and disrupt the activity of extremist Shiite militias while securing areas to be cleansed. The assumption was that an improved security situation in the Baghdad region could weaken the armed militias and bring about more suitable conditions for inter-ethnic reconciliation. Accordingly, 28,500 additional American soldiers were sent to Iraq at the beginning of 2007 and stationed mainly in Baghdad and Anbar province; this brought the number of US soldiers in Iraq to more than 160,000.

From the summer of 2007, the new strategy indeed brought about considerable improvement in the security situation, especially in the Baghdad region and in western Iraq. Based on the administration's criteria, the number of terror attacks rose steeply following the attack on the Shiite Golden Mosque in Samarra in early 2006 until reaching a peak in June 2007, but then fell by 70 percent from June 2007 to February 2008, returning to the level of mid-2005.

The number of civilian fatalities also dropped sharply: the peak of 2,500–3,000 Iraqi civilians killed per month between June 2006 and January 2007 went down to 600–700 per month by early 2008. Losses among coalition forces fell to one quarter of the May 2007 peak. Between September 2006 and September 2007, American forces lost on average between 70 and 100 soldiers per month; since October 2007 this number has dropped to between 25 and 35 per month. The number of attacks on Iraqi security forces has also dropped (figure

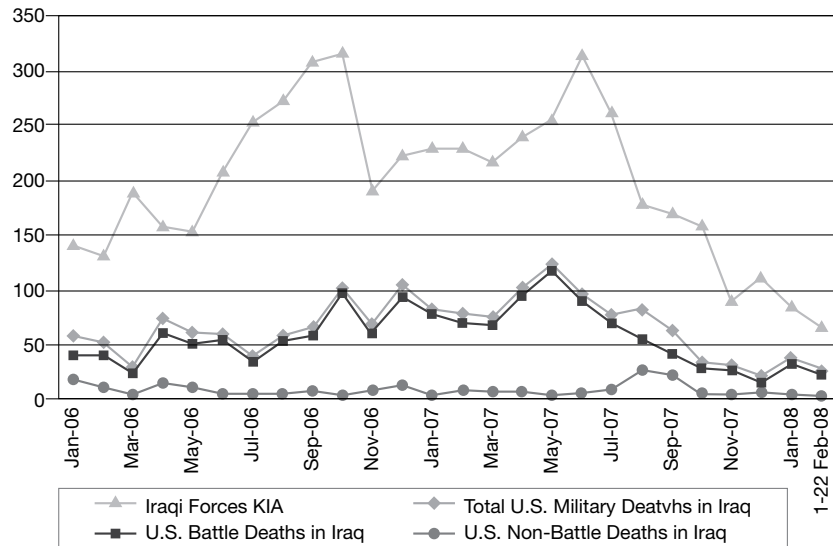


Figure 1. Fatalities among Coalition Forces, Iraqi Security Forces, and Civilians, 2006–2007

Source: US Department of Defense, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, March 2008, p. 20.

1). The more important trend is the decline in losses caused by inter-ethnic clashes. Fatalities resulting from these clashes dropped from a peak of 2,100 per month in December 2006, to 200 per month since November 2007 (figure 2).

These results in part reflect weakened al-Qaeda capabilities. Between February and November 2007, a total of 3,600 al-Qaeda personnel were either killed or apprehended, including more than 200 of the organization's senior commanders. The curtailment of al-Qaeda was the outcome of joint operations by coalition and Iraqi security forces, aided by solid tactics and improved intelligence. These operations pushed al-Qaeda back from its strongholds in Baghdad and disrupted its supply chains around the city.

In part this resulted from increased opposition to al-Qaeda activity among Sunni tribal leaders who began to realize that the organization was damaging their interests. But it also reflected

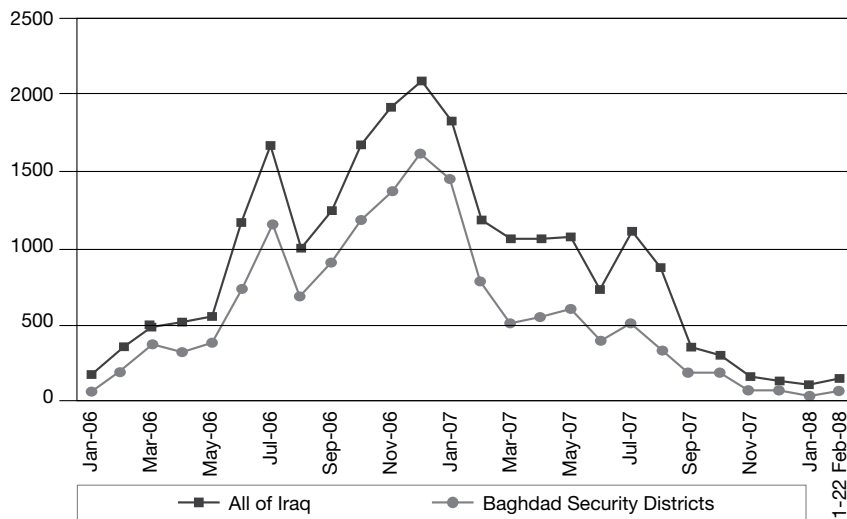


Figure 2. Deaths Caused by Inter-ethnic Clashes in Iraq, September 2006-February 2008

Source: US Department of Defense, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, March 2008, p. 21.

other changes: more aggressive operations by American forces, the activation of new methods for cleansing areas of hostile elements, which minimized the deadliness of attacks; partial disruption of the activity of extremist Shiite militias; the August 2007 announcement by Muqtada al-Sadr, leader of the extremist Shiite Mehdi army, on the freeze of activities against coalition forces; the sustained presence of coalition forces and Iraqi security forces amid the Iraqi population; the shift of populations, which while causing a refugee problem made the population in parts of Baghdad more ethnically homogenous; the advancement of civilian volunteer initiatives to help bring about calm; and a call on the part of ethnic leaders to restrain the violence.

Moreover, Iraqi security forces grew and acquired better capabilities. In February 2008, Iraqi forces numbered 531,000 trained men – 347,000 police, 181,000 in the armed forces, and 3,000 in special anti-terror forces. Future plans envision an Iraqi military of

275,000 troops by 2010 and police force of about 325,000, totaling over 600,000. In June 2005, the military had 115 battalions, of which only 24 were capable of planning and conducting operations, with or without American support. In November 2007, the number of battalions in the military grew to 175, of which 98 were capable of planning and conducting operations. Coalition forces are gradually transferring the responsibility for security in different zones to Iraqi forces; by the end of 2007, the government of Iraq was primarily responsible for the security of eight out of the country's eighteen provinces.

The decreased scale of attacks brought about improvement in other sectors as well. Shiite and Sunni leaders ceased opposing coalition efforts and cooperated more with the government of Iraq and the coalition, and specifically with the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, set up by the US in most provinces to restore infrastructure and improve the security situation. Civilians, mainly Sunni, are also – with the government's assistance – organizing and defending their surroundings against violence. The relative calm on the ground has led to the opening of schools and other social services in much of the country.

At the same time, Iraq's economic situation has gradually improved, with the help of reconstruction teams and US funding. Infrastructure is slowly being rebuilt and recovery from the war is proceeding. Real GNP growth in 2008 is expected to register 7 percent, mainly due to increased oil income and activity in the services sector. The rate of inflation dropped from 26.2 percent at the end of 2005 and 52.8 percent at the end of 2006 to 20.4 percent at the end of 2007. Unemployment continues to be a serious problem and is estimated at 17.6 percent. Oil production and exports have grown modestly (though still lagging behind pre-war levels): oil production by February 2008 was 2.4 million barrels per day (MBD) compared with 2.24 MBD at the end of 2006, and exports grew from 1.57 MBD to 1.99 MBD. Terror attacks on pipelines have disrupted oil exports, but since August 2007, increased exports and rising prices

have compensated for the disruption. Further significant economic improvement will require economic reform and increased investment in the private sector.

The Flip Side of the Coin

The security situation in Iraq has unquestionably improved since the summer of 2007. Even if the data presented by the American administration includes a certain bias, as claimed by its opponents, the trend, based on all parameters, is clearly of a significant reduction in the scale of violence and terror. Yet notwithstanding these changes, the overall picture remains more complex and less auspicious.

- Al-Qaeda strongholds have indeed been hit, but the organization remains able to increase the scale of terrorism. It is still a key agent of attacks against military and civilian targets, though it has shifted its object from coalition forces to Iraqi security forces and Sunni tribal leaders (their former allies) in an attempt – thus far unsuccessful – to curb opposition to its actions.
- Extremist Shiite militia activity and tensions between Shiite groups in southern Iraq are a growing threat to security. Shiite militia activity has increased and is responsible for a large portion of the civilian fatalities and attacks on American forces. The most important of these militias are: the Mehdi army, which has succeeded al-Qaeda as the most violent militia and has been credited with the majority of attacks against the Sunni population, and the al-Badr organization, which was first established by the Iranians. Control of the four southeastern provinces, where 30 percent of the population lives and which is the source of most oil exports, is in the hands of Shiite militias. American forces wield extremely limited influence in the south and lack a clear strategy for the region. Despite the call by al-Sadr in August 2007 for a ceasefire, attacks on coalition and Iraqi security forces continue. And notwithstanding Iran's promise to stop the flow of arms and money to Shiite militias, there has been no decrease in assistance.

- Islamist fighters continue to infiltrate into Iraq from Syria, where they receive aid and shelter. It is estimated that 90 percent of foreign terrorists reach Iraq via Syria. Towards the end of 2007 there were signs of an effort by the Syrian government to reduce the movement of terrorists to Iraq, but it is not clear whether the government has made a strategic decision to tackle this problem.
- Not only Iran and Syria are involved in Iraq. In February 2008, Turkey sent a military force into northern Iraq with the aim of destroying Kurdish strongholds there.

While Iraqi security forces have grown in numbers and quality, it is beyond their ability to conduct large operations independently. At least several more years will be needed until they are able to operate without American backing, take full responsibility for domestic security, and defend the country. A considerable portion of recruits have gone AWOL or deserted, and ethnic militias have infiltrated the ranks of the security forces and are involved in inter-ethnic violence. The Iraqi military lacks high-quality officers at all levels and is sorely deficient in terms of logistics. The police force is inefficient, infected by corruption and communal strife, and controlled by elements connected with extremist Shiite militias. If American support for Iraqi security forces stops, all progress achieved in upgrading their capability will be lost.

The main problem is insufficient progress in mitigating the inter-ethnic conflict caused by conflicting basic interests. There has been some progress in reconciliation on a local and tribal level but much less so on a national level. In order to appease the Sunnis, the Council of Representatives is working on legislation to grant pensions to former members of Saddam's regime and on an arrangement to distribute oil revenues among the ethnic communities, but it is not clear what will actually be accomplished. Under American pressure, ethnic leaders have arrived at agreements but have yet to implement them. More specifically:

- The Sunnis do not trust the government, which in their eyes was established forcibly under American occupation, is controlled by

Shiites and supported by Shiite elements with Iranian connections, and seeks permanent Shiite supremacy. The Sunnis remain divided and lack leaders able to represent the entire community and conduct a meaningful dialogue with the Shiites. The damage to al-Qaeda combined with intensified Shiite violence has left the Sunni community weak as it confronts the ethnic cleansing carried out by extremist Shiite militias.

- After generations of suppression, the Shiites do not intend to cede the historic opportunity that has fallen into their hands of consolidating their leadership in Iraq, based on their numerical supremacy. Shiite leaders are also divided over the continued American presence in Iraq and the best methods to achieve their goals.
- The Kurds remain focused on establishing their autonomy in northern Iraq and boast the largest militia, the Peshmerga. Kurds are not involved in the Shiite-Sunni conflict; but efforts to strengthen their control in Kirkuk, which include ethnic cleansing, have been a source of friction between Kurds and Sunnis.

Despite the decreased scale of violence and fewer fatalities, the number of terror attacks and casualties remains high. The number of fatalities for the entire year – 23,000–24,000 – was the second highest since the war began. One of the more credible estimates places the number of Iraqi civilian fatalities since 2003 at approximately 85,000 killed. By the end of 2007, US forces had suffered more than 3,900 troops killed. The inter-ethnic conflict has prompted ethnic cleansing in different regions, including Kurdistan, and led to a severe refugee problem. Thus far, 2.2 million refugees have fled Iraq, mostly to Syria and Jordan, while two million others have been uprooted from their homes.

Even the lower level of ongoing violence makes Iraq's economic rehabilitation difficult. Despite some improvement, the Iraqi economy is still functioning well below its potential. Some claim that the image of an improved economy is illusory, stemming partly from rising oil prices, American aid, and the fact that improvement comes from a

very low baseline and does not attest to widespread economic growth and job creation. The violence negatively influences agricultural and industrial product, especially in the oil sector. In the future, the oil sector will have to cope not only with terror attacks but also with technical and administrative challenges.

The weakness of the Iraqi government makes inter-ethnic reconciliation more difficult. The Nuri Kemal al-Maliki government does not control Iraq or represent all of the groups fighting on the ground, and it is not sufficiently ready to take reconciliatory steps. During 2007, the government partially disbanded after some of its Shiite and Sunni ministers resigned. The government's weakness hinders the achievement of an accord that could pragmatically determine the nation's political structure, lead to the establishment of effective local rule, and define a new federal structure and the relations between ethnic communities in the regions of conflict.

In order to advance real reconciliation, some essential steps – including legislative – must be taken, mainly those that would bring about Sunni integration into the government system. These steps include: distributing jobs in the central government such that Sunnis are represented in the same proportion as Shiites and Kurds and preference for Shiites is minimized; eliminating barriers to Sunni participation in the army and society, including a solution for former Baath party members; distributing oil royalties to Sunni regions, which have no oil resources; arriving at accommodations for mixed populations; and banning the existence of ethnic militias. The government indeed has taken steps in these directions – e.g., distributing oil revenues and ensuring the future of Baath party members – but divisions of opinion complicate their implementation. Yet without any real reconciliatory steps, no long-range stability can be achieved, and the limited achievements attained thus far will likely dissipate.

Iraq – Where To?

Iraq now harbors a splintered and violent society that is given to bitter rivalry and extensive crime among its ethnic components; a weak central government that does not control the country; and militia rule in the streets. These realities negatively influence the US's ability to deal with the situation on the ground, because what it now confronts is no longer only terror and insurgency, but also the much more difficult problems of a failed state and a civil war. "Surge" operations have shown that a limited concentration of American forces can improve the security situation. But such improvement will not suffice beyond the short term, because in the absence of concrete inter-ethnic reconciliation, the use of force will not generate significant long-term results. The American presence in Iraq is not large enough to establish security in all of the violent zones, even in the Baghdad region.

The Bush administration is in no hurry to remove its forces from Iraq; it has announced a limited drawdown next year but refuses to set a timetable for withdrawal. The administration has signaled that it is not about to change its Iraq policy significantly, at least until the summer of 2008 and possibly until the end of its term, unless there is some substantial change in the situation. The reduced scale of violence helps the administration persist in its approach. Even political elements in the US that demand an end to the Iraqi entanglement are for the most part not pressing for an immediate withdrawal of all forces. Instead, they demand the formulation of an exit strategy that advances a defined timetable for withdrawal, since they too understand that an abrupt withdrawal would lead to a worse situation and impair US credibility and America's international and regional status.

The reduction of violence since the summer of 2007 improves the chances for stabilizing the regime. However, if inter-ethnic reconciliation is not advanced, the prospects of success for American policy remain low. Even if there is modest improvement in the security situation, the level of violence will remain high. The flare-up of fighting in April 2008 in Baghdad and Basra between Iraqi security

forces, supported by American troops, and Shiite militias indicates how fragile the situation is. And even if there is some progress in inter-communal relations and economic conditions, stabilizing the region and the security situation will take years. However, it is doubtful whether the present American administration or its successor has years at its disposal, considering the domestic pressures to withdraw from Iraq.

In any event, Iraq will not revert to what it once was: a united country ruled by a strong central authority. At best, Iraq will become a country with a loose federal structure. The central government will be weak, since large parts of the country have already turned into ethnic provinces ruled by militias. Iraq will neither become a stable country, at least in the next few years, nor will it be democratic. The ability of the US to shape the ethnic character and the structure of this establishment will be highly limited.